

Designing and Evaluating a Virtual English Enrichment Course for Improving Chinese Learners' Communicative Competence in English

Abstract

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The aims of this study were to design and develop an online virtual English Enrichment Course (EEC) to develop Chinese English learners' communicative competence. This study addressed two research questions. First, it considered whether learners progressed in communicative competence after studying the EEC course, and if so, in which elements. Second, it explored learners' perceptions of the course features that contributed to developing their communicative competence. The development of the course was supported by a complex educational design model, which integrated communicative language teaching theory, learning theories (complex dynamic systems theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory) and conversation-based communicative computer-assisted language learning.

The design-based research study comprised four cycles of development, implementation, analysis and refinement of the course. Approximately eight students from China were invited to attend the EEC course in each research cycle; Research Cycles 3 and 4 additionally involved comparison groups. The effectiveness of the course was examined through comparing students' progress on pre-tests and post-tests. Students' perceptions of the EEC course were examined through questionnaires and interviews.

The findings showed that the EEC course significantly helped students to improve the sociocultural and interactional elements of communicative competence. Key features identified by the students as helping them to improve their communicative competence included the interactive nature of the course, the specialist knowledge of the invited English speakers concerning the topics and the aim of the course to develop communicative competence.

This study contributed to these main areas: development of the concept of communicative competence and of new assessment tools for it, including presentation with a focus on question and answer; development of assessment criteria for sociocultural competence; and pioneering and developing complex educational design theory. The lessons learned about the development of core concepts, theories and practice from extensive iteration in design-based research are shared and the future development of the EEC course is proposed.